**HR Excellence in Research Award, July 2020**

**Progress Report – 4 Year Evaluation and Review**

SOAS University of London has established itself as a world-class research institution whose scholarship is uniquely rooted in the political, social, economic, historical, and cultural dynamics of Africa, Asia, the Middle East and their diasporas. Our key research themes – Global Voices, Heritage of Humanity, Global Interactions, Sharing a Small Planet, Global Diplomacy and Governance – bring together and build critical mass in areas where we are able to make a real difference. As outlined in the [SOAS Research Strategy 2020-2024](https://www.soas.ac.uk/research/researchstrategy/), our internationalism and commitment to justice, diversity, equality and the highest ethical standards infuse our research activities. By 2025 we will have integrated impact and knowledge exchange into all that we do, equipping our researchers with the skills to become fluent interlocutors in global and national debates on the critical issues of our time and influencers in (inter)national research. We will achieve this by establishing structures, systems, and processes that better support researchers at all career levels, and especially early career researchers (ECRs). While COVID-19 has had a huge impact on our researchers, many of whom are engaged in face-to-face interactions in countries deeply affected by the pandemic, we have convened a task and finish group on how we continue to do excellent research in the changed context and we have had sub-groups working on things like how to ensure research support with grant development and negotiating extensions, how we develop and adjust our research planning processes, and how we can best proceed with developing knowledge exchange and enterprise ideas that can contribute to SOAS’s sustainability in this difficult time.

Our vision for the support of researchers is outlined in the [SOAS Research Strategy](https://www.soas.ac.uk/research/researchstrategy/) and our focus on Equality and Diversity in the [Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Strategy (2016-2020)](https://www.soas.ac.uk/equality-diversity-and-inclusion-strategy/file113520.pdf). We welcome the opportunity for our support to research staff to be benchmarked against the Concordat to Support the Career Development of Researchers. SOAS proudly received the HR Excellence in Research Award in October 2012 and retained it in 2016. This report and the associated action plan outline our internal evaluation process and provide information for the external four-year review to consider progress in supporting the principles detailed in the Concordat.

**Background**

Although a relatively small institution with currently approximately 50 research-only staff, SOAS is growing both in numbers and research income. Our income from research grants has more than tripled since the last Research Excellence Framework (REF) period, from £2.6m in 2013-14 to an average of £8m per year in the last three years. We were able to attract large grant funding from funders such as the UKRI, EC, and DFID. This is an important indicator of the impact of our research and the School’s commitment to supporting researchers.

Since the previous review in 2016, a number of functional areas in the School have restructured their services and now provide enhanced support for researchers. We have improved the quality of support in the Research Office and the new role of Head of Research Support brings more proactive support in the form of hosting funder visits, grant proposal writing workshops with tips by our ‘grant heroes’, drop-in sessions, and through attendance at Departmental meetings. These activities are advertised in the weekly online Research Bulletin. As part of our continuing commitment to building a diverse and excellent research community, the new role of Associate Director of Research with the remit for Research Ethics and Researcher Development is important. The Senior Careers Consultant provides dedicated support regarding career development in the form of personal advice, practice interviews, and workshops. The HR restructure has improved our selection and recruitment processes. We have a comprehensive action plan in place to prioritise equality, diversity and inclusion objectives for 2020-2024. The Library and Learning Services have demonstrated their commitment to the SOAS Research Strategy by creating the new Scholarly Communications Team who offer dedicated support for open access research publications, research data management, and uptake of responsible metrics.

In preparation for REF2021, each department has produced a research strategy, which is currently being reviewed in the light of the Covid-19 pandemic, requiring a contingency plan for online research in an agile environment. In addition to departmental research strategies, individual researchers are expected to write a Personal Research Plan (PRP). After consultation with the School’s research community, the PRP has been redesigned with a focus on putting in place a stronger coach-approach mentoring scheme, aiming in particular at supporting the research career development of underrepresented groups, specifically BAME and female staff, and at enabling to provide better support for ECRs. Specifically, the redesigned PRP supports researchers to produce their best possible work, to have the greatest possible impact, and to generate the funding that can sustain and expand the originality, significance, and reach of their research.

**The Review Process**

From the outset, our research strategy and progress have been agreed, supported, and monitored by the Research and Enterprise Committee (REC), chaired by the Pro-Director Research and Enterprise and comprising the Director of Research and Enterprise, Associate Directors of Research, members of academic and professional services, and two doctoral researchers nominated by the Students' Union Executive Committee. REC is a sub-committee of Academic Board (AB) to which it reports. REC convenes the HR Excellence in Research Working Group, chaired by the Associate Director of Research responsible for Research Ethics and Researcher Development and comprising key members of professional services and two ECRs. This group, which meets on a termly basis with follow-up online meetings, evaluates and monitors progress and is responsible for developing the four-year action plan. It reports progress to REC annually, including in May 2020. Feedback from the REC members is collated and helps evaluate progress and set goals for the forthcoming year.

To ensure substantial input from ECRs in both the mid-review and the four-year review process, the Working Group presented the action plan during the ECR Forum, which takes place 4-6 times per year. This mechanism of involving ECRs in the review process was highly appreciated as illustrated in the following statement by one of the participants:

*Thank you very much indeed for the update on plans for bringing together the SOAS-ECRs into a community. There was such an evident amount of thought and consideration that has gone into the planning so far, and I want to thank you all for that. And it all seems harnessed to ensure that we might thrive, feel connected, build our networks, develop much-needed professionalization, knowledge and resources, access mentors, support one another…and enter into a reciprocal and valued relationship with SOAS.*

The ECR Forum is appreciated by our research community not only as a bottom-up approach to research planning and development, but also as a platform to meet other researchers from different departments.

**Evaluation of Achievements and Progress since 2016**

Considerable progress has been made in our support for research staff over the past four years with the appointment of new staff providing dedicated research support. There have been substantial developments in the area of research ethics including an agreed Ethics Policy and Code of Practice, with the Research Ethics Panel comprising a cross-departmental range of academics, a research student, and a lay member. A new Research Management system called Worktribe, which enhanced information about, and planning of, externally funded research, was introduced in 2017. Using Worktribe, the Research Office has been able to efficiently support the development of over 70 applications for ECR fellowships and research grants in 2019-2020. Since the introduction of Worktribe, the number of applications has tripled and the application volume has doubled. The revised staff orientation programme ensures that researchers meet with HR on their first day, as a result of which they are better integrated into the SOAS community and are aware of the policies and practices relevant to their position. A major grant holder network was launched in 2020 to support PIs who manage teams and share good practice. The network has been very successful: 75% of the invitees attended the first meeting. Evidence from the Personal Research Plans completed by ECRs so far indicates that the majority of researchers feel included in their departments and are routinely invited to departmental meetings and research seminars. In order to consolidate their research profiles and to allow them to develop new research projects and funding applications, ECRs have a reduced teaching load and are not allocated any major administrative roles. A survey conducted among Departmental Directors of Research in 2019 showed that ECRs are fully integrated into the research environment via mentoring, encouraging them to submit work in progress for review by senior colleagues and through the use of Working Paper series, and inviting them to present work at seminar series. In addition to these existing support mechanisms, more work is needed to ensure that ECRs are included in institutional schemes like the SOAS’s seedcorn funding scheme.

Because of our relatively small size, it remains difficult to offer effective redeployment opportunities to research staff on fixed term contracts. However, in line with our research mission to foster a new generation of researchers who can understand and engage with the world as global citizens, ECRs are encouraged to turn the outputs of their research into new processes, products, and practices that meet the requirements of the private, public, third (Charities), and fourth (Social Enterprise) sectors, thereby improving employment prospect and job security. The School’s new Knowledge Exchange Strategy provides guidelines on how to apply scholarship for the benefit of the economy and society.

Full details of progress against the original action plan are provided in the action plan 2020-2024. A summary of highlights from the last four years is provided below:

**Progress against Principle 1 Recruitment and Selection**

The School has an ongoing commitment to open, transparent, and merit-based routes to recruitment and progression, which attracts excellent researchers from around the world. Our commitment to fair and inclusive selection and appointment practices is demonstrated by our membership and award of the expanded Athena SWAN charter in respect of gender equality. In 2017, the School’s Recruitment and Selection training was reviewed ready for the commencement of the 2018-2019 academic session and our policy on gender representation on interview panels has been monitored more closely since. Unconscious bias training is mandatory for members of selection panels and completion of this training has been made a requirement for academic promotion panels. Training has been provided at the start of each process since 2017 and uptake is 100%.

**Progress against Principle 2 Recognition & Value**

Building a culture of inclusion and the process of the support, mentoring, and monitoring of research informs the School’s key objectives to address the recognition and reward of all researchers, and ECRs in particular. A newly constituted team in HR reviewed researcher roles to ensure greater uniformity in job titles and job descriptions and to determine the level of pay or grade according to the requirements of the post. Standard job descriptions and person specifications for research roles are now being used by recruiting managers. Researchers on fixed termed contracts are offered exit meetings and PIs are sent automated reminders of this. At SOAS we strongly believe in the importance of researchers’ overall well-being and we have a range of information, resources, and events available to researchers to this end. In 2016, a new employee assistance programme was purchased providing staff and their family members access to a free, external, confidential wellbeing service.

**Progress against Principle 3 Support & Career Development**

# Facilitated by the Staff Development Office, the ECR Forum helped build an interdisciplinary research network. Professionalization workshops and research development training have been offered at both departmental and School level. Application to funding schemes targeting ECRs has been encouraged and applicants have been actively mentored, leading to high-quality submissions. Over the last three years we have seen a substantial increase in successful ECR grants: SOAS has been awarded seven BA postdoctoral fellowship, three Marie Slodowska-Curie individual fellowships, two International Newton Fellowships or Mobility grants, one ERC Starting grant and several charity funded postdoctoral fellowships. Through online consultation with ECRs, SOAS’s Impact Team picked topics for a number of well-attended impact training workshops in 2018-2019 and 2019-2020. Impact training is also offered online and is targeting especially ECRs. In 2020, the School launched a project that brings researchers’ outputs into our institutional repository, SOAS Research Online, which is being promoted as an Open Library. Researchers are offered 1-to-1 support and useful tips on boosting their research profile such as registering for an ORCID iD. Research staff who also teach at SOAS are required to complete the core units of the HEA-accredited PDHEP Programme.

**Progress against Principle 4 Researchers’ Responsibilities**

It is core to SOAS values that research is carried out in an ethical manner. In 2016, we began the roll-out of the online Epigeum Research Integrity course, which has been made mandatory for doctoral researchers and research staff on externally-funded projects. The current uptake among doctoral researchers and research staff is 77%. Thanks to extensive work by the Staff Learning & Development Team and Research Office in providing training in proposal writing and online training modules, which serve as self-learning resources for ECRs, as well as advice on funding schemes, our ECR community has started engaging more proactively in their own research development. The success of this training and guidance is manifested in the increased number and volume of research grant applications and awards (see under Evaluation of Achievements and Progress). The SOAS Open Access Policy has been substantially updated, clearly stating researchers’ responsibilities to engage with the Open Research movement and highlighting the guidance and support available to them.

**Progress against Principle 5 Diversity & Equality**

SOAS’s diverse student and staff population is one of our greatest assets. Diversity and equality are at the core of all the School’s activities. In 2017, we set up a Working Group to address the disincentives and indirect obstacles to retention and progression, which may disproportionally impact on some groups more than others. The overall data for the assessment period show that there were tangible improved outcomes connected to key changes in practice, including family friendly policies, the re-modelling of promotions panels, and the re-design of the promotion application process. In 2019, we developed a programme of work aimed at bringing about transformational change in our organisational culture at SOAS. As part of this institution-wide approach, we have revised our policies, processes and procedures, including a new Dignity@SOAS policy to tackle bullying and harassment. Additionally, we have undertaken a review of our case management procedures.

**Progress against Principle 6 Implementation & Review**

Since researchers are considered among the key stakeholders within the School, they are provided with formal and informal opportunities to engage with relevant organisational policy and decision-making processes, which have been made more transparent. Organisational policies are shared via SOAS Sharepoint to which ECRs have access. ECRs are represented on REC and the Research Excellence in Research WG, who are responsible for developing and implementing SOAS’s research strategy.

**Strategy 2020-2024 by Concordat Principle**

We have developed an updated action plan that sets out the focus of our strategy for the next four years. The updated action plan incorporates continuing actions from the original plans, extending current initiatives where appropriate, and added new actions that build on our progress and align with the School’s Strategic Plan.

**Principle 1: Recruitment & Selection**

To be an employer of choice, we will collect and analyse comprehensive workforce data; ensure equal opportunity in the recruitment, development, and reward of our staff; embed inclusive workplace practices that value all staff; develop and deliver diversity and inclusion training at all levels of the School; and benchmark our performance as an employer to continually improve our performance.

**Principle 2: Recognition & Value**

As part of our commitment to improving employment conditions for researchers, we will ensure that all researchers are included in the School’s probation and redeployment processes. Furthermore, we will develop ways to improve the promotion prospects of research-active staff on teaching-only contracts such that they may be able to progress to positions with research responsibilities.

**Principle 3: Support & Career Development**

Given the current financial climate, there is less funding available for training and structured support for researchers. This risk will be mitigated by developing a research specific coach-approach to mentoring, more tailored guidance with regard to research career development can be provided. Recognizing that researchers may pursue careers outside academia, we will invite alumni across a wide range of employment sectors to our careers events.

**Principle 4: Researchers’ Responsibilities**

All researchers will be required to complete a PRP. These research plans will feed into the Staff Development Reviews, aligning with a bottom-up process of formalizing links involving researchers and departments with a strategic approach that promotes inclusivity, consistency, and coherence within the School. ECRs will take ownership of the ECR Forum and arrange at least four meetings per year.

**Principle 5: Diversity & Equality**

While the outcomes of our Equality, Diversity and Inclusion policy are encouraging, we are working towards the next level of quality outcomes by focusing on intersectional aspects going forward. Progress in this area will focus in closing the identified gap between members of BAME and other underrepresented groups and white applicants and final post offers.

**Principle 6: Implementation and Review**

To enable us to measure progress against our action plans, data will be collected from research staff and PIs via CEDARS on an annual basis. Focus groups will be run annually with ECRs and Departmental Directors of Research to measure engagement with the plan. We will continue to hold a termly HREiR award Working Group, which will report to REC each May. Based on exit interviews, HR has started collecting information on what we are doing well and what can be improved, which will feed into an automated system. The feedback will be monitored by REC.

**Broad Success Measures**

Our success will be measured in terms of timely achievement of the actions set out in the Action Plan. The actions will not be static, but will be updated annually to ensure they remain relevant. Additionally, our success measures include the following:

* Evidence of progress of general support for research staff through the ECR Forum, research consultation, and surveys;
* Data from the Research Office and from feedback provided by researchers taking part in the activities organized by the Research Office, the Staff Learning & Development Team, Careers Services, and Scholarly Communications;
* Data on engagement with Staff Learning & Development workshops and schemes;
* Data on engagement with institutional HR processes;
* Data on usage of Worktribe, the Epigeum Research Integrity Online Course, and web pages for research support;
* Data from the annual staff survey;
* Successful renewal of the Athena Swan award;
* Continued ability to attract and retain international research staff despite Brexit.

SOAS has signed up to the 2019 Researcher Development Concordat. During the transition process, we will engage with research staff during mentoring meetings, training events and research seminars, the ECR forum, HREiR Award Working Group Meetings, and the Research and Enterprise Committee (REC) where ECRs are represented. ECRs will be involved in the gap analysis through focus groups, surveys and departmental engagement with the Directors of Research. To engage the latter in the transition process, we have established a monthly Research Directors Network.